DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 408 026 PS 025 337

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TITLE Kids to Kids International: By Creating Picture Books Your Students Can Communicate with Children from Different Cultures.
PUB DATE 96
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
JOURNAL CIT Journal of The New England League of Middle Schools; p40-42 Fall 1996
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Childrens Writing; *Cultural Pluralism; Intermediate Grades; Language Arts; Middle Schools; *Multicultural Education; *Picture Books
IDENTIFIERS Book Production; Middle School Students

ABSTRACT

This article describes the implementation of the Kids to Kids International (KTKI) program, a student-created picture book program that gives children an opportunity to learn about and understand each other. At the Rochambeau Middle School in Connecticut, KTKI has become part of the integrated language arts program, a Writers Club, an enrichment class, and Spanish classes. The benefits of KTKI include encouraging students to think beyond their own world and become interested in learning about others, enhancement of self-esteem, and becoming change agents. In implementing KTKI, teachers talk to their students about who will be receiving and reading the books they create. Students decide which countries they would like to send books to and do some research on that country. Other decisions to be made include deciding whether students will work individually, with a partner, or in a group, and whether older students will assist younger ones. Students are guided to avoid insensitive or inappropriate themes for books sent to refugees from civil war or victims of violence. Writing begins with a brainstorming session to discuss ideas for inclusion. When students have developed a web of topics, they select one topic for their focus. The writing process approach includes prewriting, the rough draft, editing, revising and editing, and developing the final draft. (KDFB)

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The JOURNAL of The New England League of Middle Schools Fall 1996

ED 408 026

KIDS TO KIDS INTERNATIONAL

By Creating Picture Books Your Students Can Communicate With Children From Different Cultures

by Monita Leavitt

KIDS TO KIDS INTERNATIONAL is a student-created picture book program that gives children the opportunity to learn about and understand each other. Books created by American children are sent around the world along with small packets of drawing supplies, enabling those who receive the gift to be a giver as well as creator of books for others.

Kids To Kids International began in 1986 when children's author, Pat Kibbe, spoke to a group of fourth grade students in Vermont about what it was like to be an author. During her presentation children asked questions about the book she was writing. Pat explained that her main character was a Cambodian refugee boy coming to America. She told them that he was very much like the one in a newspaper photo which she held up for all to see. With the goal of living in America, the little boy was holding a postcard of New York City given to him by a U.S. newspaper photographer visiting the camp. It was his prized possession, and probably, she surmised, the only thing he really owned.

To help her story's refugee boy begin communicating with his new American classmates, the children suggested creating picture books for their new friend. Then one boy asked, "Pat Kibbe, can we write to that Cambodian boy?" Pat explained that they couldn't write to him because he didn't speak English but the children could draw pictures for him. They could draw pictures of what they knew and loved most. Another boy raised his hand and asked, "But if we draw the pictures, will you see to it that the Cambodian boy gets them?" Pat agreed that she would try.

As Pat Kibbe continued her talks to school children, she realized that more and more American children shared the same concern for other young people who don't have as much as they do. More and more children wanted to do something to help make a difference.

When boxes of drawings began arriving at her home in New York, Pat decided to go to Washington, D.C., where she contacted an interested relief agency: Refugees International. There she asked to have the boy in the newspaper photo identified so he could receive all the pictures she had collected from the American children. The director told Pat that not only would he see to it that the boy received the pictures but he'd do something even better; he would send Pat Kibbe to Cambodia. Within two weeks Pat flew to the Thai-Cambodian border and personally delivered 500 student-created picture books and supplies to the camps. An airline agreed to ship the remaining 2,000 books and materials.

When Pat Kibbe arrived at the refugee camp, she saw little faces with eyes peering over fences. These were not like the white picket fences her own five children looked over; these were barbed wire fences. Pat compared these Cambodian children to American children she had known. They ate meals, but from pots and bowls cooked over an open fire. They slept at night in woven hammocks. They attended school in outdoor classrooms. Within 30 minutes of her arrival, Pat Kibbe found the little boy in the newspaper photo from among the 35,000 kids in the camp. It seems that everyone remembered the day seven months earlier when Mong Kheam was given the post card from the American cameraman. It had made him a celebrity. Mong Kheam was brought to meet Pat and she was able to give him the pictures from the American children.

It worked! Pat Kibbe's idea of children creating picture books to communicate when unable to speak the same language worked not only in the book she was writing, but in real life too. In 1991 Kids To Kids International (KTKI), a non profit organization, was born. As our curriculum becomes more global, the need for students to connect with children in other countries becomes even greater.

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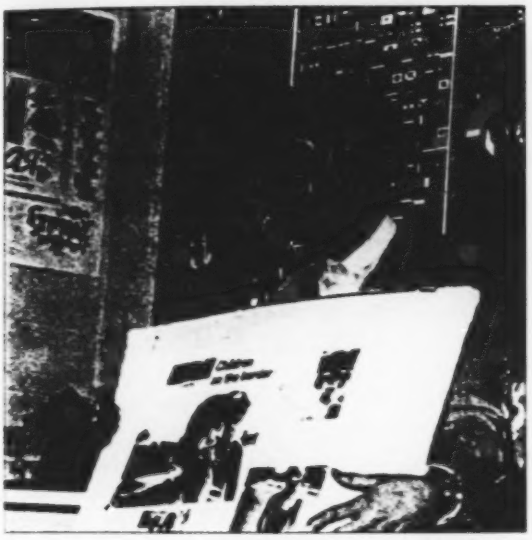

photo by M. Leavitt

Children's author Pat Kibbe tells the story of Mong Kheam and the beginning of KTKI.

The more contact kids have with people from different cultures, the more understanding and tolerance there will be. Kids To Kids International offers students an opportunity to become a resource. By creating picture books, kids are empowered to make changes in the lives of other kids around the world.

Five years ago, our students at Rochambeau Middle School in Southbury, Connecticut, created and sent 170 books to KTKI for children in Cambodia. Every year since, we have sent our boxes of books to KTKI; some have also gone to Russia and to South Africa.

Kids to Kids International appeals to a wide audience of educators. It is an easy program to implement and integrate with classroom curriculum and offers student writers an authentic audience. Teachers find that showing books and/or pictures of students from third world countries can be a very powerful tool for motivating their own students to write. Whether from urban, rural or suburban classrooms, teachers, librarians, and administrators note the simplicity yet genuineness of the books children create. Quality products are produced by children of all ability levels.

Kids to Kids International is easily implemented. At Rochambeau Middle School it has become part of our integrated language arts program. Here seventh graders coach fifth graders in the writing process and assist them in creating their books.

It has been successful as a Writers Club as well as a before-school enrichment class. Along with classroom and gifted education teachers working with KTKI, Spanish class and inclusion teachers are now involving their students. And KTKI continues to grow! This is the second year that our middle school students are teaching KTKI classes to third graders at a local elementary school. KTKI provides a truly "authentic" audience for the product of a performance assessment task.

The benefits from Kids to Kids International are both local and global, short and long range. Children are encouraged to think beyond their own world and become more interested in learning about others. Their perspective changes as sensitivity deepens. The ability to give enhances self-esteem. Learning becomes more relevant as children reach out to an even greater community and work together to create their gift for a very real and needy audience. As children become more pro-active they take on the role of becoming the change agents. They truly know that now they can make a difference.

Today, PTA's, librarians, enrichment and art teachers, and especially classroom teachers and parents have worked together to make successful picture book projects. Many schools have found it helpful to involve the children in fund raisers to instill a greater personal commitment to the program. Through KTKI, student-created picture books and supply packets have been sent to almost two dozen countries in Latin America, Africa and Europe.

photo by M. Leavitt

Fifth Graders work on their picture books.

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photo by M. Leavitt

A seventh grader lists ideas for her fifth grade partner.

How To Create Books For KTKI

Talk to your students about who will be receiving and reading the picture books they will create. Decide which of the countries in the KTKI list your class would like to send their books to. Have your students do some research to learn about the people and culture of this country. Think about how your students' books should be written. Will you have students work independently, with a partner or in a cooperative group? Do you want the entire class to work on one book or will older students assist younger students.

American middle level students have frequent exposure to violent topics through cartoons, television and movies. They also often take for granted a level of affluence not found in third world countries. Students need to be sensitive to appropriate themes and what might be offensive or inappropriate to send to children who are refugees from civil war, the victims of violence or members of certain cultures. Such topics should be thoroughly discussed with students.

photo by M. Leavitt

A fifth grader gets some help from his writing partner.

The actual writing begins with a brainstorming session to discuss possible ideas to include. Students may draw a web with their name in the middle surrounded by ideas. Remind them that a good author writes about what she or he knows best.

Once students have developed their own web of topics, they can choose one topic to focus on. They can then begin the writing process approach:

a. Prewrite
b. Rough draft
c. Edit
d. Revise and edit
e. Final draft

Remember, careful proofreading is essential!

Since your students are creating picture books, remind them that the illustrations should enhance and clarify the writing. Students can draw their own pictures, have an artistic friend help out, or cut them from old magazines. They should consider the size, length and construction of the picture book. What materials will they need? Help them to plan carefully so they don't run out of pages! Be sure students include an author's page. They may want to include a photo of themselves for the other children to see.

It's important for students to bind the book. They can staple, sew, or add thread to punched holes to keep the story pages together. Using clear contact paper to laminate the pages will help the book to survive the turning of pages when it is read time after time by the child who receives it.

To receive a KTKI teacher's manual (including a step-by-step guide for making your class's student-created picture books and having them sent by Kids to Kids International to children in other countries) send to:

Kids To Kids International
1961 Commerce Street
Yorktown Heights, NY 10598

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